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# VISUALISING THE NEOLITHIC

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# Visualising the Neolithic: Abstraction, Figuration, Performance, Representation

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*Neolithic Studies Group Seminar Papers 13*

*Edited by*

Andrew Cochran and Andrew Meirion Jones

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This book is dedicated to the artist and photographer Ken Williams  
whose work is actively forwarding archaeological research  
and whose photographs embellish the cover of this book.

To view more of Ken's wonderful photography go to:  
[www.shadowsandstone.com](http://www.shadowsandstone.com)

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## Painting a picture of Neolithic Orkney: decorated stonework from the Ness of Brodgar

*Nick Card and Antonia Thomas*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper presents some of the recent discoveries from the Ness of Brodgar, a remarkable complex of Later Neolithic buildings in the centre of the *Heart of Neolithic Orkney* World Heritage Site (Historic Scotland 1998; Figure 8.1). Over 100 decorated stones have been recovered from the ongoing excavations (Figure 8.2). The assemblage is characterised as much by its variety as by its size, consisting of both worked architectural stone and portable pieces with lightly incised ‘scratch art’ and deeply carved geometric motifs; ground and pecked cup-marks; and densely pick dressed masonry. Many of the carved stones remain *in situ* within the complex’s buildings, offering a rare and direct insight into the ways in which these designs may have been created, seen and experienced during the Neolithic life of the site. In 2010, the discovery of painted stonework on the site added to this extraordinary collection.

The excavations and research are ongoing and as such, it is not the aim here to give a final analysis of the decorated stones from the site or a definitive account of Neolithic visual culture in Orkney. Comparable decorated stones from Orkney will be discussed and the Ness of Brodgar site will be introduced. Preliminary observations regarding the assemblage up to and including the 2010 season of excavation will then be summarised, with a focus upon the stones from one particular building, Structure 10. It will be argued that the variety of inscription processes seen across the site indicate more than a chronological development or aesthetic concerns. This is seen most clearly in Structure 10, the largest and latest building in the main phase of the site. The focus of the current paper is the decorated stone from the site; whilst it is accepted that pottery, bone and other materials are equally important to our understanding of Neolithic visual culture, space and the ongoing nature of the excavations preclude a wider discussion of these forms here.

### NEOLITHIC DECORATED STONEWORK IN ORKNEY

Although Orkney has no known open-air rock art comparable to that found in the landscapes of many areas of northern and western Britain, there is a sizeable assemblage of decorated stonework from built structures such as tombs and houses. It is perhaps surprising, given the level of attention that Orkney’s Neolithic monuments have received in the archaeological

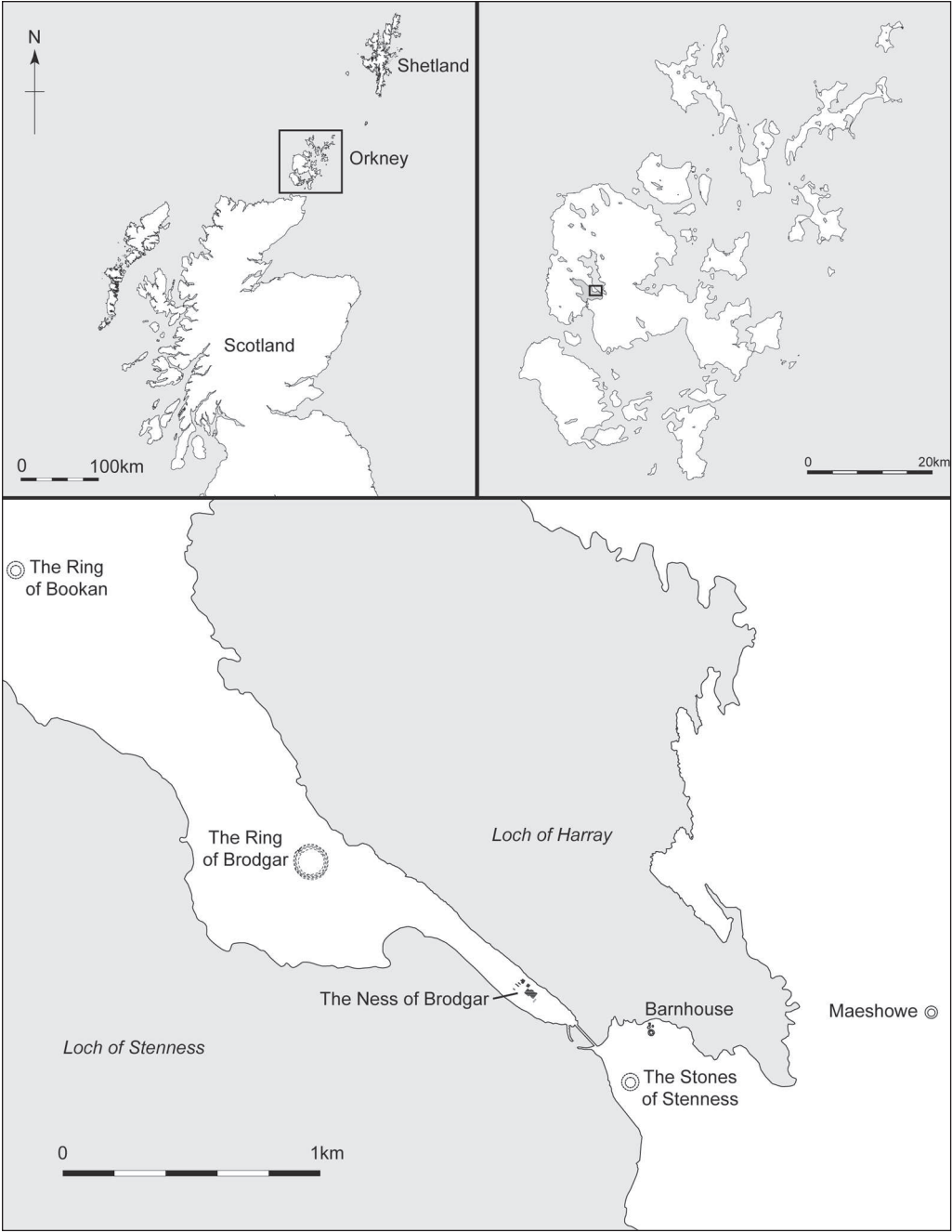


Figure 8.1: Location of the Ness of Brodgar site, Orkney.

literature, that the accompanying decoration of the stonework of those monuments has been so understudied (with notable exceptions such as Bradley *et al.* 2000 and Shepherd 2000) in comparison to material from Ireland or Brittany, for example. This can probably be partly explained by the fact that until recently (and in contrast to other regions) the majority of the known examples from Orkney came from a domestic, rather than a funerary or 'megalithic' context: Skara Brae.

Gordon Childe first recognised a large number of decorated stones at Skara Brae in the 1920s and recorded motifs ranging from 'random scribblings' to 'carefully executed' designs throughout the settlement (Childe 1931, 150). More decorated stones were recorded during the 1972–4 excavations and Elizabeth Shee Twohig subsequently added to Childe's (1931) original catalogue in her corpus of western European megalithic art (Shee Twohig 1981).

Childe identified four processes of decoration which he defined as: (i) simple scratchings; (ii) engraving involving deeper incisions; (iii) carving yielding deep V-shaped grooves; and, (iv) pecking from a chisel-like tool (Childe 1931, 150–1). Shepherd (2000, 141) rightly notes that the wide variation in treatment and process seen on the Skara Brae stones precludes them from being treated as a single assemblage; this is supported by the evidence from the Ness of Brodgar, as will be discussed below. The breadth of the evidence from Skara Brae also suggests that the scarcity of similar incised slabs from contemporary excavated settlements, such as Barnhouse (where only one incised slab was found: Downes and Richards 2005, 81, fig. 4.29) may only reflect the level of survival or recovery.

The discovery in the 1980s of 'scratch art' comparable to the Skara Brae designs inside Maeshowe (Ashmore 1986) gave a funerary as well as a domestic context to incised stones. Between 1998 and 1999, a team led by Richard Bradley discovered further designs in Maeshowe in addition to previously unrecorded incised and pecked motifs in the tombs of Cuween, Wideford, Quoyness and the Holm of Papa Westray South (Bradley *et al.* 2000). In addition to these designs, there are also a small number of elaborately carved and pecked stones in Orkney, the style of which invites comparison with the megalithic carvings from Newgrange and other sites in the Boyne Valley, Ireland (Shee Twohig 1997, 387). The most spectacular of these was found in 1981 during quarrying activity at Pierowall, Westray (Sharples 1984), where in addition to two smaller stones decorated with rough pecked spirals, a large stone block was found which was saturated with carved and smoothed spirals and concentric arcs. The largest stone was envisaged as the lintel for the entrance passage into the tomb; the two further decorated stones were recovered from the quarry spoil heaps and their original position is unknown (Sharples 1984, 4–5).

A further probable entrance passage lintel, similarly decorated by carved grooves subsequently pecked and smoothed to form a pair of spirals, two sets of concentric circles and part of a third and fourth set of circles was recovered from a destroyed tomb at Eday Manse in the nineteenth century (Davidson and Henshall 1989, 116; 81, pl. 25). Less elaborate designs are found within the Holm of Papa Westray South tomb, which may have originally contained up to 11 examples of pecked decoration on the flagstone masonry within the main chamber (Davidson and Henshall 1989, 81, pl. 24; 121–3). These exhibit a range of motifs including circles joined by horizontal lines, shallow cups, inverted Vs, a triangle shape, double arcs (the 'eye-brow' motif) and a number of further cupules, lines and Vs.

A flagstone slab was recently found at the Neolithic settlement site of Green on Eday (Coles *et al.* 2010) that exhibits a series of pecked designs that are similar to those in the Holm of Papa Westray South tomb. These designs overlie a series of fine, incised motifs but do not appear to respect them (Coles *et al.* 2010, 15). The slab appears to have been deliberately placed in the entrance to a dwelling when the building went out of use; the freshness of the pecking suggests that the stone was not re-used from elsewhere (*ibid.*, 16) and it may be that the stone was decorated as part of the ‘decommissioning’ of the building. A flagstone slab with a carved and pecked chevron and dot design was found in a similar context within the demolition layers infilling Structure 9 at Pool on Sanday (Hunter 2007, 49, illus. 3.18; 70).

The ongoing excavations at the Links of Noltland, Westray, from where the ‘Orkney Venus’ carved sandstone figurine was recovered in 2009, have produced architectural masonry displaying pecked chevron motifs and several cup-marked stones built into the walls of structures on the site (Moore and Wilson 2011). Pecked designs are known from a few other sites, such as the stone decorated with two weathered, indistinct spirals removed from a ruinous mound and built into the wall of a workshop at Arsdale in Evie (RCAHMS 1946, 85) and a spiral-pecked stone recorded from Redland Broch in Firth (*ibid.*, 91). A heavily weathered sandstone piece pecked with two sets of concentric circles was recently found on a South Ronaldsay beach (Towrie 2008); its original provenance is not known.

Pick dressing – involving the repeated, percussive act of hitting the stone to create a uniformly pecked surface – should also be regarded as a highly specialised process of stone decoration in its own right. It is relatively rare in Orkney, and is only really seen ‘*at sites that are apparently “different” or “important”*’ (Philips and Bradley 2000, 109). This is in marked contrast to Neolithic tombs in the Boyne Valley, for example, where it is a well-recorded phenomenon (Eogan and Aboud 1990), often as the final stage in a succession of overlying treatments applied to decorated stones (Eogan 1997). Analysis of the pick dressing within Maeshowe revealed that it was concentrated at critical thresholds within the tomb (Philips and Bradley 2000, 107), indicating that it was meant to be seen and perhaps even felt (*ibid.*, 108). Extensive areas of pick dressing are also recorded at the rock-cut tomb of the Dwarfie Stane in Hoy and at the Stones of Stenness (*ibid.*, 106).

Cup-marked stones are also relatively rare in Orkney and when they are found, their context is often ambiguous. A stone with several cup-marks found at Howe, Stromness, formed part of a modified entrance arrangement (Ballin Smith 1994, 13), possibly to mark the transformation of the building from Early Neolithic house to Later Neolithic tomb. Many other examples appear in later monuments, such as the two cup-marked stones (one with partial ring-marks) at Midhowe Broch in Rousay: one built into the broch tower; the other in a later structure to the south (RCAHMS 1946, 200). The original provenance of these stones is not known, nor for the stone with five cup-marks built into a post-medieval byre at Quoys in Hoy (RCAHMS 1989, 17), or the stone pecked with several cup-marks, including one with concentric rings, found in an indeterminate structure at Pickaquooy near Kirkwall (RCAHMS 1946, 162).



## THE NESS OF BRODGAR

As discussed above, until recently, relatively few examples of Neolithic decorated stonework had been found in Orkney, with even fewer from secure stratigraphic contexts. As a result of the excavations at the Ness of Brodgar however, the number of known examples has more than doubled.

The Ness lies in a natural bowl of the West Mainland of Orkney on the tip of the Brodgar peninsula midway between the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar. It was clear that, even before excavation revealed the unusual nature of the Ness, the site occupied a key axial position in the centre of this monumental landscape.

An example of Neolithic art had been discovered on the site in the 1920s (Marwick 1926), but until recently this had been considered an isolated example of a reused slab associated with several conjoined Bronze Age stone ‘cists’. Excavation has now shown that this slab was probably part of one of the Neolithic buildings. In 2002, Orkney Archaeological Trust (in association with Orkney College) initiated the World Heritage Area Geophysics Programme (Card *et al.* 2007, 422); as part of the first season the two fields constituting the Ness of Brodgar were surveyed and results indicated activity extending over an area some 250m by 100m north-west to south-east (GSB 2002).

Following the discovery of a large notched slab during ploughing in 2003, an evaluation revealed part of a building (Structure 1) with internal angular architecture (Ballin Smith



*Figure 8.2: Aerial view of the main trench at the Ness of Brodgar looking SE towards the Stones of Stenness.*

2003). In its primary phase this appears to have been very similar to Structure 2 at the nearby Neolithic site of Barnhouse some 300m to the south-east (Richards 2005). Further test-trenching and small-scale area excavations took place from 2004 to 2006 (Card 2004; 2006; Card and Cluett 2005). These investigations showed the large whaleback ridge to be largely artificial, comprising a tell-like accumulation of Neolithic middens, structures and enhanced soils, associated with Grooved Ware pottery (Card 2010). Ongoing open area excavation from 2007 (Card *et al.* 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010) is now revealing the full complexity and spectacular nature of the site (see Figure 8.2).

The exceptional preservation (several buildings surviving to over a metre in height) and complex deep stratigraphy mean that only the later phases have been revealed so far, giving an insight into a time when the Ness would have been dominated by a series of monumental stone buildings (see Figure 8.3). The first of these main phases is represented by several buildings: Structures 1, 8 and 12 – all in excess of 15m long – with further

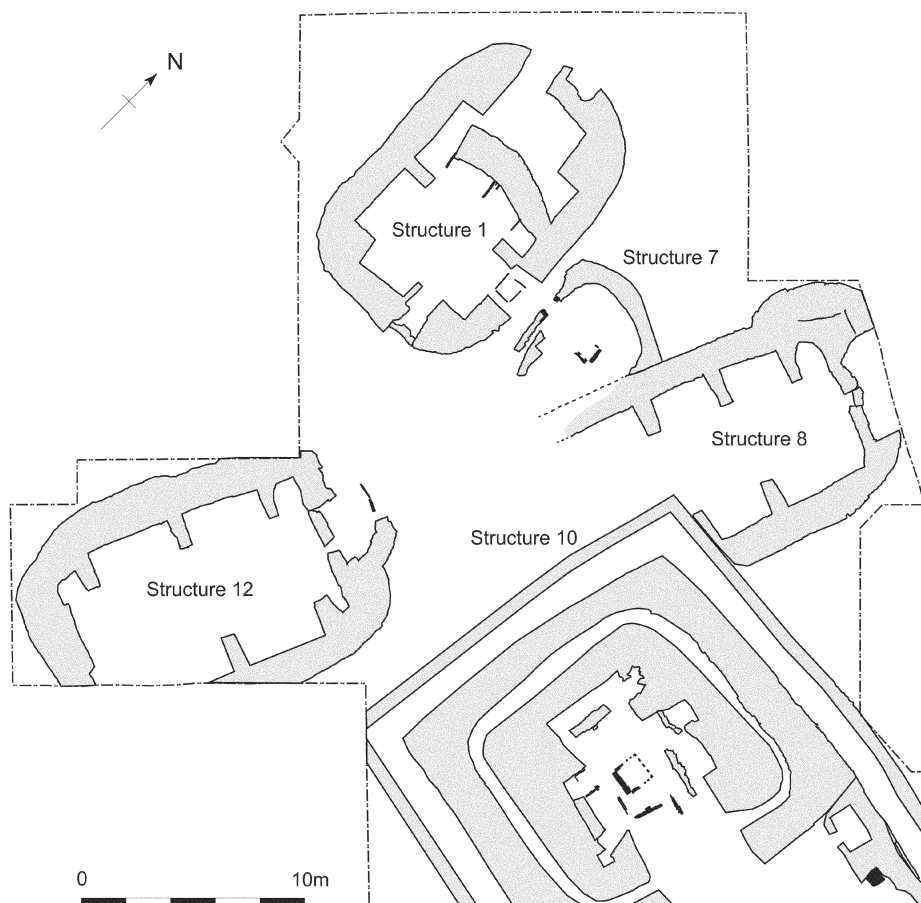


Figure 8.3: Simplified plan showing the structures in the main trench at the Ness of Brodgar.



structures indicated by geophysics outwith the excavated areas. In these three structures, the internal space is divided by opposing pairs of slightly tapered stone piers, creating a series of recesses along the internal wall faces. Although as yet stratigraphically unproven, their contemporaneous use is implied by their spatial respect for each other: roughly similar alignments (north–south), internal angular architecture, and layout (including almost identical internal widths between the ends of the piers).

In Structure 8, a horizon of collapsed thin stone roofing slabs was encountered just above the occupation layers. These had been trimmed into regular rectangular shapes as seen today on traditional stone-slatted Orcadian roofs. Similar evidence for slatted roofs has also been identified in Structure 1. The similarities in the architecture of Structures 1, 8 and 12 may reflect similar functions. Their special nature is also reflected in the unusual array of finds. Although floor levels have only been partially revealed in Structure 8, for example, the recovered artefacts include axes, maceheads, a cetacean tooth and a polished shale object.

The last major phases on the site are represented by the cessation of use, and perhaps deliberate destruction and infilling, of Structures 1, 8 and 12 (at least in their primary form) and the construction, use and decommissioning of Structure 10. This shows a marked departure from these earlier buildings: in its scale (over 20m long by 19m wide, and with 5m thick walls), complexity (the incorporation of a standing stone in its build, a paved surround and alignment with Maeshowe), and interior design (a cruciform shaped central chamber). Many of these characteristics can be paralleled in funerary architecture, but the building also exhibits features found in Orcadian Neolithic houses such as a central hearth and a ‘dresser’<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, these are also of an unusual nature. The dresser incorporates naturally coloured red and yellow sandstones, which in several cases have extensive areas of pick dressing (discussed below), while the hearth is of a scale comparable to that at the Stones of Stenness (Ritchie 1978, 12) and Structure 8 at Barnhouse (Richards 2005, 172). As will be discussed further, the different nature of Structure 10 is also reflected in its decorated stones.

At the end of Structure 10’s ‘life’, the building was decommissioned: an upturned cattle skull was placed in the central hearth beside an elaborately pecked stone and the pathway surrounding the building was filled with a thick deposit of bone (over 85% of which are tibia) representing hundreds of cattle. The interior was then suffocated with a sequence of dumps of midden-enhanced soils and rubble, and the walls systematically robbed.

The complexity of the structures on the Ness of Brodgar implies a detachment from the domestic sphere: this distinction is further emphasised by the striking manner of the buildings’ enclosure. A 4m wide wall – later remodelled to 6m in width – forms the northern limit of the site. This wall has a large external ditch and runs perpendicular to the isthmus before gently curving round parallel to the loch shores. The southern limit of the main structures on the site is defined by a wall only 2m wide but surviving to over 1.7m in height. Although not yet proven stratigraphically, it seems that these two almost parallel walls are part of the same construction. They would have formed an enclosure c. 125m by 75m in size, which would have defined and emphasised the importance of all of the major buildings on the Ness – a walled precinct.

The Ness of Brodgar formed an integral part of a rich monumental landscape of stone circles, chambered tombs and henges that reflects the sophistication and dynamism of

Orkney in the Later Neolithic. It is in the context of these extraordinary structures that a vast array of decorated stonework has been found.

#### DECORATED STONEWORK AT THE NESS OF BRODGAR

Although one of the first indications of archaeological activity at the Ness of Brodgar had been the discovery of the carved stone in the 1920s, it was not really until 2008 and the uncovering of Structures 1, 8 and 10, that the true wealth of the decorated stones on the site was realised.

The most common form of stone decoration on the site is lightly incised, often multi-layered, geometric motifs, which are found both on and in the buildings: on and within the walls themselves, in collapsed masonry and on portable slabs. Despite the casual superficial appearance of these scratched designs, the execution of many of them would have required careful consideration (Figure 8.4). Moreover, the context of many of the portable examples, such as the cist capping in Trench J, or the pieces within the rubble filling the ditch associated with the enclosing wall and infilling Structure 1, indicates acts of considered votive deposition.

Stones with incised and carved geometric motifs have now been recorded on all of the main structures on the site. Last season, this extraordinary assemblage was enhanced by the discovery of painted stonework (Card 2010; Card *et al.* in prep.). Although a small portable slab emblazoned with a red arc was recovered from Structure 10, the use of pigment on *in situ* structural stone has only been recorded in Structures 1 and 8 so far. The probable source of haematite for these pigments came from the adjacent island of Hoy, whose dark hills dominate the skyline to the southwest of the site. At this stage, it is not clear how the application of pigment may have worked with the types of decoration described above: it is possible that the incised lines could have formed a sketch to be filled in later with paint, or the incised lines could have cut through painted surfaces. Richard Bradley found possible

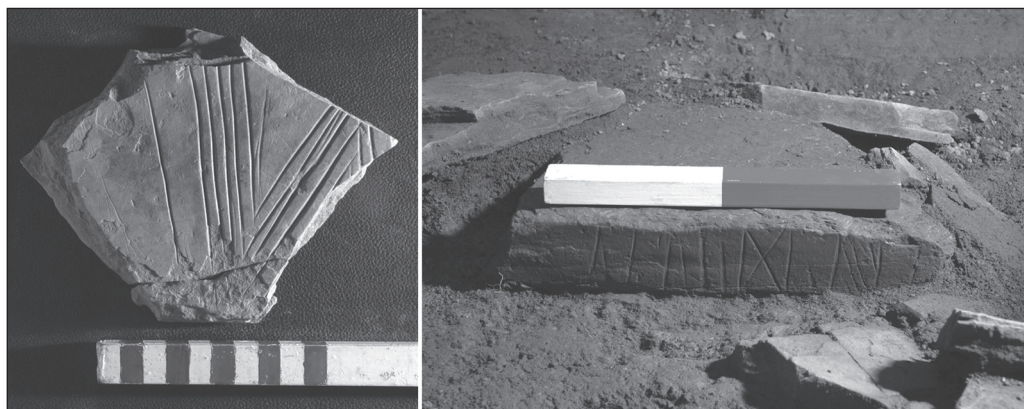


Figure 8.4: Examples of the carefully executed designs from the site. Left: a portable slab recovered from Structure 10; right: a structural stone from Structure 8.

traces of pigment on the wall to the right of the entrance within Maeshowe that corresponds with an incised design (Bradley *et al.* 2000, 54) and it may be that the incised designs at the Ness would originally have been coloured in. At Skara Brae, Childe (1931, 137) recorded traces of red and white pigment and several small pottery vessels interpreted as paint pots; a number of similar potential ‘paint pots’ have also been found at the Ness of Brodgar. In Structure 8, the pigment is applied to form geometric designs such as rough chevrons; elsewhere it is used to cover stones completely, such as in the side entrance to Structure 1 where it complements naturally-coloured stones by creating a banded appearance.

The construction, use and decommissioning of Structure 10 represents the last stage of the main phase of buildings and is associated with a marked change in architecture and stone decoration. It is here that the most elaborate and greatest number of pecked and ground stones has been found. This structure does have a number of significant stones with incised designs, including the large flagstone slab forming part of the surrounding pathway, but its assemblage is dominated by cup-marked, pecked and pick dressed stones.

A large stone block, of a shape and size that would have fitted within the left-hand side of the dresser, and covered in roughly pecked cupules on two faces, was found placed in the centre of Structure 10’s hearth. This stone represents one element in a series of ‘closing events’ that included the placing of an upturned cattle skull in the hearth; both sit upon occupation deposits but are themselves sealed by the primary infilling and demolition layers. Within the stratigraphic sequence therefore, this stone’s placing marks the interface between the occupation of the building and the chain of demolition events signalling the end of Structure 10’s use.

A cup-and-ring pecked stone from Structure 10 (Figure 8.5) was also recovered from rubble layers near to the dresser and it is tempting to think that this once occupied a prominent position. The discovery of this stone in the demolition layers, coupled with the freshness of the pecking offers a further possibility: the act of working this stone itself formed part of the process marking the decommissioning of the building and the end of Structure 10’s life. This finds parallel with the carved stones found at Green, Eday (Coles

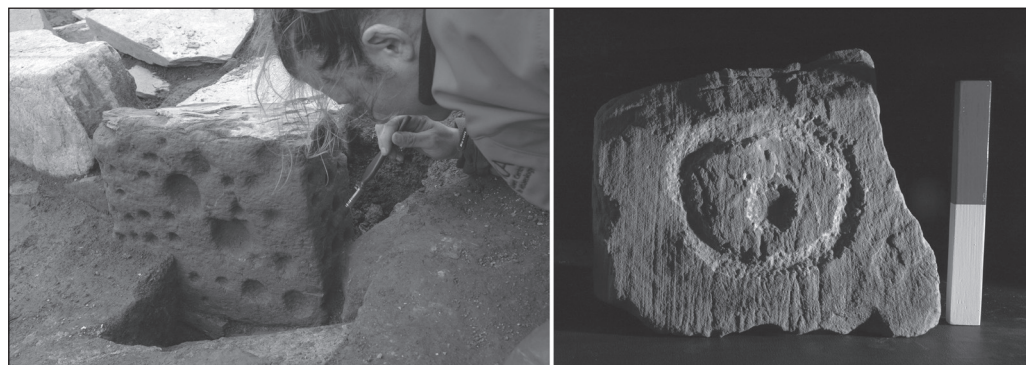


Figure 8.5. Examples of pecked and cup-marked decoration, Structure 10. Left: the multi-cupped stone in the entrance to the building; right: the cup-and-ring pecked stone recovered from demolition deposits filling Structure 10.



*et al.* 2010) and Pool, Sanday (Hunter 2007). Interpretation is cautious at this stage, as the particular biographies of many of the stones at the Ness of Brodgar are uncertain; however, the evidence does indicate that the placing of pecked and ground stones is associated with moments of change and transformation in the ‘life’ of Structure 10.

This is supported by the concentration of cup-marked stones in the eastern forecourt area, which is a later extension to the original construction and includes a paved cell and walls enveloping a substantial monolith of fine-grained camptonite. This standing stone contains a drilled hole in its southwest corner that has been bored in from both sides to create an hourglass-shaped perforation; half of a similarly perforated slab was recovered from within the rubble in the central chamber. There is a pecked cup-mark on its western face and the two large slabs immediately to the west of the monolith are covered in further pecked cup-marks. One of the packing stones within the socket for this standing stone was also covered with pecked and ground cup-marks (Figure 8.6). Its position buried in the cut for the stone suggests that once *in situ* neither its visibility nor its visual appearance was an important concern and it may have been the act or event of carving itself that was significant.

Many other cup-marked stones were at least partially hidden from view during the use of Structure 10, including the most elaborate stone so far discovered from the site, a multi-cupped block decorated on two faces and which sat within the internal entrance to the central chamber (see Figure 8.5). This stone cut into the rammed clay surface more deeply than the rest of the wall, meaning that the lower third of the stone sat below the wall-line. The full extent of the decoration on this stone may not have been visible to those allowed to enter the building.

In addition to the use of stones with incised and pecked decoration, key spaces in the interior of Structure 10 – the alcoves and the dresser – were enhanced through the use

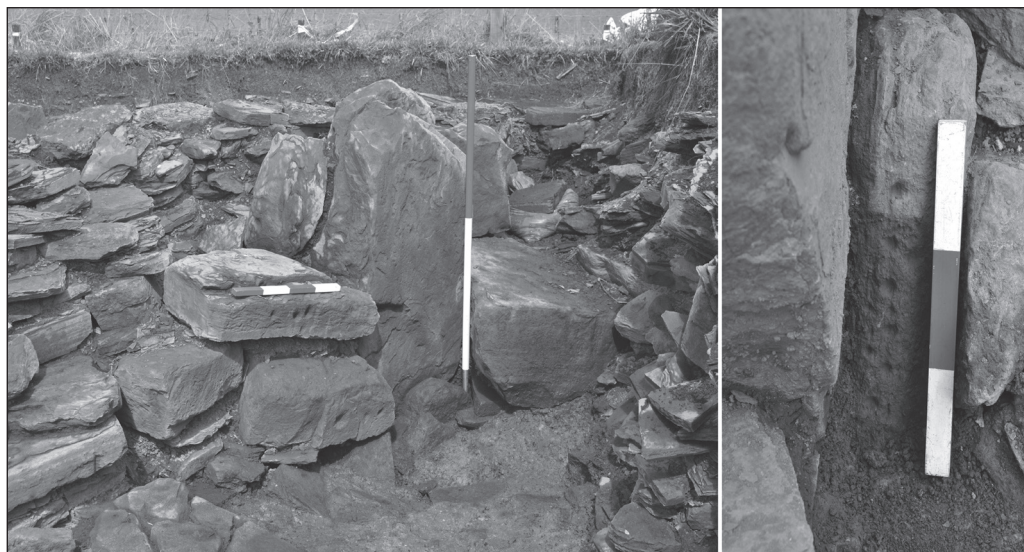


Figure 8.6: Left: the standing stone in the eastern forecourt area of Structure 10 with associated cup-marked stones; right: detail of cup-marked packing stone in standing stone socket.

of coarse-grained red and yellow sandstone, contrasting strongly with the flagstone used more generally on site. These stones were treated differently from the others, not only in their placement in key locations in the structure, but also in their surface treatment. Both the red and yellow sandstones were dressed using a diffuse pecking process, covering the entire visible surface of the stone; this treatment of the *coloured* sandstones makes it seem unlikely that it was intended to create a surface for plaster, as suggested for the pick dressed areas within Maeshowe (Philips and Bradley 2000, 110).

This dressing may have served to enhance the natural aesthetic qualities of the stones' colour by creating a more uniform surface texture (Bradley 2009, 210), but the intensive engagement with the stone involved in this process also needs to be considered. As a method of stone working, pick dressing involves a deep attentiveness to the surface and material of the stone itself (Cochrane 2009, 164), and the exploitation of the red and yellow sandstones in this way emphasises their significance. The nearest source for this stone is at the Head of Houton, which lies some 10km from the Ness of Brodgar (John Flett Brown, pers. comm.; Mykura 1976, 80), and the use of these stones indicates something of the scale of labour involved in the procurement of materials from a range of different sources. This is particularly expressed in the construction of Structure 10, indicating a communal activity that would have brought together groups from across Orkney. It is also notable that – in contrast to the cup-marked stones, for example – it is only the visible areas of the stones that were pick dressed, indicating that they were decorated *after* being installed.

## DISCUSSION

The Ness of Brodgar is, as yet, the only site in Orkney where the full suite of Neolithic decorative stone working practices – scratching, carving, pecking, pick dressing and painting – can be studied, and moreover, in secure stratigraphic contexts. Yet how are we to understand these inscriptions? The blanket designation of Neolithic carved stonework as 'art' by archaeologists has proven highly problematic as the use of this term immediately transposes modern notions onto prehistory (Bradley 2009, 4). It also has the consequence of treating all forms of stone working equally, without regard to subtleties of process or context. Traditional narratives have thus been predicated upon a series of interrelated assumptions: that images 'mean' something to start with; that such a meaning could be deciphered in the Neolithic; and by extension, that modern archaeologists should also be able to translate this meaning (Cochrane 2009, 173).

At the Ness of Brodgar, however, the different processes of stone treatment across the site merit further and more subtle consideration. This can be seen most clearly with the example of the cup-marked stones in Structure 10. Many of these would have been at least partially hidden from view. Once *in situ*, their appearance would not have been fully appreciated, indicating that their visual form was not a consistently important concern. This contrasts with the pick dressed and many of the incised designs, which were worked after they were put in place and which were clearly meant to be seen, or even touched (Philips and Bradley 2000, 108). It is difficult to explain such a disparity if only the seen characteristics of the carved stones are considered, and this observation suggests that the different processes of working the stone in the first place should also be examined.

Rather than focussing purely upon the stones' final visual form, the social and performative contexts by which the designs come to be created should be explored (Jones 2007, 175–6). These can be explored through a study of the different processes that created them and this study will form an important part of our ongoing research.

Pecked cup-and-ring marks and incised motifs are now generally recognised as broadly contemporaneous, as opposed to representing a chronological development (O'Connor 2007, 184; *contra* Waddington 2007), and this is supported by the evidence from Structure 10. The recurring link between carved stones and monuments associated with transformative rituals and commemorative traditions has been widely noted (e.g., Jones 2001). It is argued here that the cup-marking of the stones themselves played a crucial role in both the construction and the demolition of Structure 10. Coming at the end of a remarkable sequence, the construction of Structure 10 on the site represents a transformation of the Ness of Brodgar, and in Neolithic Orkney, times of transformation and change – both architectural and social – were accompanied by distinct stone carving processes. In Structure 10, it seems likely that the carving of many of the cup-marked stones represents 'votive motif deposition' (O'Connor 2009, 157), after which their visual characteristics ceased to be important. The acts of carving these stones formed key roles in both the construction and demolition of this building – and thus the transformation of the Ness of Brodgar site itself.

## CONCLUSION

The structures at the Ness of Brodgar defy simple definition, containing the architectural features of both funerary and domestic structures but going far beyond either in terms of scale and elaboration. The diversity of processes and designs seen on the carved stones from the Ness of Brodgar is unparalleled in Orkney and offers a unique opportunity to understand stone carving in the Neolithic. Rather than reinforcing simplistic arguments concerning chronology, aesthetic form and representation, the Ness of Brodgar material can allow a meaningful response to recent calls to focus upon the role that working and decorating stone plays in the creation, maintenance and contestation of identities (O'Connor and Cooney 2009). The differential decoration of stonework seen across the site, most clearly with the dominance of pecked and ground stones in Structure 10, indicates much more than chronological sequence or pure decoration, leading us to challenge previous interpretations.

The Ness of Brodgar assemblage allows a thorough investigation of how both the process and products of inscription were deployed in different settings and at different stages in the life of monuments. The fieldwork is ongoing and the primary levels of occupation in the structures of these later phases have yet to be reached; in parallel to the continued work on site there is clearly a need for a re-evaluation of stonework from other Neolithic sites in Orkney. As a consequence, the interpretations put forward in this paper will be subject to reconsideration as the excavations progress and the full potential of the remarkable assemblage from the Ness of Brodgar reveals itself. Only then can we really start to paint a picture of life in Neolithic Orkney.

## NOTE

- 1 We accept that ‘dresser’ is a problematic and loaded term, as it immediately connotes ideas of modern domesticity that have little validity when transposed onto the Neolithic. Despite these shortcomings, however, it has become common terminology and is seen as preferable in this instance rather than introducing a new, but equally loaded term (such as ‘altar’).

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